

A Truly Larger than Life Figure

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Christian Ziller was a native of Pennsylvania. Sometime before 1862, he and his wife Anna Louisa Henry moved from Pennsylvania to Weston, Illinois. In 1862, they had a son named William Henry Ziller. William married Almira Busby, and they had four children.

One of William and Almira's children was a son named George William Ziller. He was born in 1899 in Weston, Illinois. George W. Ziller would grow to be a mountain of a man with a height of six feet six and a weight of 525 pounds. George Ziller's father died in 1903 at the age of only forty-one years old. George's mother became a widow and had to raise four young children in Weston.

In September of 1918, George enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in the heavy artillery section. He was honorably discharged four months later in January of 1919. After the war, he resumed his job at Ziller Motors in Pontiac. George started wrestling in Fairbury in 1919. He would wrestle all challengers at the Fairbury Fair. In 1921, George Ziller was selling the Lexington brand of automobiles in Richmond, Indiana.

Sometime before 1926, George went out west. He met and married Rachel "Rae" Grace Overman. She was born in 1902 in California and died in 1984 in Nevada. Many newspapers reported she was a small woman who weighed less than 100 pounds.

George's first recorded brush with the law occurred in 1926 in Los Angeles. When police officers found that George would not fit into their police car, they had to requisition a special truck to transport him to the jail. They discovered that Ziller was six feet six inches tall and weighed 606 pounds. He was charged with two counts of grand larceny and two counts of embezzlement. Mr. D. S. Yoder alleged that he hired George Ziller to collect a \$2,000 debt owed to him. Mr. Ziller collected the debt money but kept it for himself instead of returning it to Mr. Yoder. When officials determined that George would not fit into a jail cell, they released him immediately on bond.

In 1927, George was arrested again in Los Angeles for impersonating a Department of Justice agent in Granite City, Illinois. George defrauded W. W. Camp of a small amount of money by the asserted impersonation. He was arrested in Los Angeles, then transported back to Illinois for trial.

George then moved from Los Angeles to Reno, Nevada. The Nevada State Journal newspaper reported that George W. "Jack" Ziller was a 538-pound man who operated a stock exchange dealing with mining securities in Reno during the early 1930s. He ran his stock exchange in the Odd Fellows building and later in the Golden Hotel. He was arrested for disturbing the peace in Reno. In 1934, George W. Ziller declared bankruptcy

in Reno, Nevada. His bankruptcy notice recounted that stockbroker Ziller had debts of \$119,641 and his assets were \$69,789.

In the 1940 U.S. Census, George and his wife were living in Fairbury, Illinois. Current Fairbury citizens remember that his wife Rae worked as a waitress at the Honegger Cafe on Locust Street in Fairbury. Fairbury's new City Hall now stands where the Honegger Cafe used to be located.

In 1942, the United States was at war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Various war factories were set up in Illinois to make weapons and supplies for World War II. These war factory jobs were union jobs that paid very well. The competition was tough to get hired into one of these war factory jobs.

George W. Ziller made national news in 1942. The Illinois Attorney General and the McLean County State's Attorney started an investigation that alleged George Ziller sold jobs in the Illinois war factories. It was reported that in the early months of 1941, crowds gathered each Sunday about the home of Ziller in Weston. People formed lines to see him about the privilege of working on the government projects. Witnesses reported they paid Ziller \$300 in advance for a war factory job, plus \$63 for union fees. After they got the job, they had to pay Ziller \$50 per week from their paycheck. Job applicants also had to pay Ziller \$25 to join his Democratic Club. It was estimated that Ziller took in over \$400,000 in income from this scheme. Newspapers reported he had homes in Weston, Fairbury, Springfield, and Chicago.

Ziller got one man a war factory job. After the man started the job, he decided to quit paying Ziller the \$50 a week fee. Ziller told the man that if he wanted a fight, he would send some boys out of Chicago to take care of him. Ziller said to him that hiring the Chicago boys would only cost him \$50.

This scandal attracted national newspaper coverage. All aspects of George Ziller's life were investigated and then reported in many newspapers. It was reported that George always carried a large wad of cash. He kept a \$1,000 bill wrapped around the outside of the bundle of money. One of his cars was a big black Cadillac that had a red spotlight. The red spotlight designated that the vehicle belonged to a police officer. George carried a police officer's star, but nobody knew who issued it to him. People said that George drove seventy miles an hour through Bloomington on his way to Springfield and did not pay attention to any stoplights. The Bloomington police officers just waved at him as he drove by.

The FBI eventually joined the investigation. During the investigation, Ziller disappeared for a while. It must have been embarrassing for the officials to admit they could not find a six-foot six-inch man that weighed 525 pounds!

Eventually, Ziller was found and indicted on five counts of conspiracy and operating a confidence game. Because of all the publicity in McLean County, a change of venue to Piatt County was granted. The Piatt County judge dismissed all the charges because of a

procedural error in McLean County with the grand jury. Officials decided to try to indict George again in 1945. This time, George decided to plead guilty because he claimed he had poor health. He was fined \$1,350 and released.

George was briefly jailed again in 1947 for attempting to bribe members of the Illinois House of Representatives. He filed for bankruptcy again in May of 1947.

Many of George's neighbors when he lived in Weston reported that he was a good fellow who often gave treats to the local children. He once threw a big picnic in Weston where alcohol was served. When some of the guests had too much to drink, George stopped the serving of additional alcohol. George W. Ziller became ill in 1957 and was admitted to the Fairbury Hospital. He died in the Fairbury Hospital, and the funeral was held in Chenoa. He was buried in Payne Cemetery in Eppards Point Township.

